

by

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The Chinese initiative to the United States, in 1970-1973, including President Nixon's visit to Peking, may at first glance seem to have been a major change of policy for the Chinese government. Why would China, with apparent suddenness, attempt to resume relations with an archenemy of 25 years? What benefits could be gained from rapprochement with the "center of decadent capitalist imperialism?" Why did the Chinese choose this particular time to make such an overture? An analysis of China's domestic, political, military and economic situation combined with her view of the international political scene will show that this initiative was both logical and rational in terms of China's perceived national interests.

China's foreign policy was driven very much by domestic political concerns and her economic situation. Mao and the political elite--the veterans of the Long March, personified by Chou En-lai--felt themselves the stewards of "pure Marxism-Leninism." They had forged their new society at considerable cost in terms of personal sacrifice and economic growth. There was a lack of consensus among political leaders as to the course China should follow in the development and implementation of her ideological and "revolutionary" ambitions. The Great Proletarian Revolution was a dramatic indication of the wrenching internal political problems that the ruling party was facing in determining the course which China was to follow. The fact that Chou himself had been imprisoned by the Red Guard also

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points to the depth of this great political struggle for the control of China's destiny. Dr. Kissinger's observation of anti-American posters on display during his second visit to Peking was another indication that the internal debate was ongoing even after Chou had initiated discussions with the United States.

The domestic situation was further exacerbated by concerns of Russian meddling in internal Chinese politics. The fear that Soviet "revisionists" such as Lin Piao could infiltrate the Chinese hierarchy and attack the revolution from within was very real. The ideological confrontation with Russian-style communism resulted in both China and Russia viewing the other as an "illegitimate" regime which, combined with ethnic hatred and a history of troubled relations, had led the Chinese to view the Russian threat--both politically and ideologically--as predominant.

Chou En-lai also knew that isolation and internal upheaval had left China in a secondary position in the world economic arena. China lacked the technology to modernize and compete for badly needed international trade. The margin between economic growth and a burgeoning population of some 800 million was growing increasingly thin. China had always placed a premium on self-reliance and entry into the world economy was necessary to maintain that position.

Chou realized that China was weak militarily and lacked the resources and technology to modernize its armed forces quickly enough to counter a growing Soviet threat. There was a need to find a state of equilibrium in order to allow China to develop both economically and militarily to a point where basic national survival could be ensured.

The combination of these internal concerns--the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution combined with the realization by Mao and Chou that continued isolation was a mistake--led Chou to become a proponent for a U.S. initiative. There had been a continuing internal debate over which was the lesser of two evils--confrontation with the United States or attempted rapprochement with the Soviet Union. The Soviet intervention into Chinese Domestic politics and the Euro-communist threat to Chinese Marxist-Leninist ideology was viewed by Chou as the foremost threat. As will be shown, the Chinese leaders' view of the international geopolitical scene further reinforced their view of the ultimate danger posed by the Soviet Union.

China was virtually at war with the Soviets along their mutual border. The Soviets had already threatened China with escalation beyond conventional warfare if the Chinese did not relent. The fear of Soviet invasion or nuclear attack was prevalent. If China was forced to back down, this humiliation would have a most detrimental effect toward China's relations with Third World countries where it was attempting to export its revolutionary ideology.

China also was seriously concerned and felt threatened by Soviet hegemonic aspirations in Asia and Indochina. The Soviets had become a major supplier of Hanoi in the Viet Nam war. The U.S.S.R. also had signed a Friendship Treaty with India which stated that the Soviets would defend India in the event of Chinese intervention in an Indian-Pakistani dispute. The possibility of near total encirclement with Russia on one side sharing a long mutual border to the north and a ring of nations under Soviet influence to the west and south was a frightening prospect.

In the Asian theater, China had three overriding concerns. First, the issue of Taiwan remained unresolved. China wanted to resolve the Taiwan issue in its favor and consolidate all Chinese people in the Peoples Republic of China. U.S. support of the Nationalist Chinese was an obvious impediment to this goal. Second, the U.S. involvement in the Asian theater was a factor to be dealt with. The U.S. was involved in what the Chinese viewed as an "imperialistic campaign" in Viet Nam. They also viewed U.S. involvement in the Phillipines as a vestige of "colonial imperialism." Finally, the bilateral combinations of the United States and Japan provided a strong security blanket for the Japanese, allowing them to pursue their economically hegemonic ambitions in Asia and Indochina. Japan was perceived as a rival for influence over the Asian peoples and a potential economic and military threat. In the final assessment from a Chinese view of the international political scene, Chou En-lai concluded that the overriding threat to China's national interest and to its prestige and standing in the world community came not from the "imperialistic" United States but from the "revisionist" Soviet Union.

Chou perceived that the time was right for initiating an overture to the United States. The United States was weary of a protracted involvement in Viet Nam. However, an American presence was needed in Indochina because, if America retreated, a power vacuum could ensue which the Soviets could use to their advantage to continue their "encirclement" of China. There was room, therefore, to reach some form of understanding or accomodation to balance the U.S. and U.S.S.R. in Southeast Asia to meet Chinese ends.

Chou also felt that Japanese foreign policy could be favorably altered or controlled by the U.S. to lessen the threat of Asian hegemony from the east.

Chou En-lai was well aware that China was dealing from a position of weakness in relation to the two superpowers but it was a position that had relevance in Chinese history. China had traditionally been weak and had used that position to its advantage over time. The Chinese had even gone so far as to attempt to exhaust powerful nations during the division of the spoils of Chinese conquest. His country's political and economic problems dictated the search for a minimum-risk, minimum-cost approach to foreign policy. One factor was to be flexible enough to play the two superpowers one against the other and reap political benefits from their confrontational distractions. This policy would also allow the Chinese the advantage of time to pursue both economic development and gain the military strength necessary to establish a defense-in-depth against possible Soviet attack.

The strategy which evolved--to open lines of communication with the United States--fit nicely into the Chinese view of the struggle to achieve their ends. The Chinese had always taken the long view--Chou had spoken to Dr. Kissinger about Mao's vision far into the future--and this fact influenced their approach to foreign policy. Although their long-range goals remained unchanged with regard to "winning the ideological struggle for the minds of the masses", in the short term "necessary compromises" had to be made to solve intermediate problems. This, of course, is the classic position of practitioners of power politics.

Chou En-lai was a master at using relationships of political convenience to maintain a balance of power favorable to China's interests.

Chou En-lai thus arrived at the conclusion, based both on domestic political economic realities and an overall assessment of world politics, that the United States was in the right place at the right time to serve China's national interests.

There was one other factor--the personalities of the key players on the American side--that cemented Chou's conviction to pursue an American initiative. Chou had, as Dr. Kissinger related in his account of their negotiating process, an extensive understanding of American affairs and a deep knowledge of both Kissinger and Nixon. Chou--a believer in the balance of power and the objectives of Real-politik-- had to be keenly aware that both President Nixon and Secretary of State Kissinger also possessed a dispassionate view of the reality for "necessary compromise." He had to have believed that President Nixon and Dr. Kissinger would be willing to set major ideological and political differences aside if convinced that American interests could also be furthered by some form of accomodation with the Peoples Republic of China. Thus, the stage was set and Chou En-lai cast the die for rapprochement as the logical and rational temporary solution to the political situation confronting his country.

The strategy Chou embraced during preliminary negotiations with Secretary of State Kissinger and during the Nixon Visit was one of pure persuasion. Chou and Kissinger spent many hours of discussion outlining their respective views of the world situation. They each attempted to explain their country's interests and goals.

Both protagonists knew that the aims of their respective foreign policies had converged in time but were not necessarily compatible. There was no illusion of forming, at that time, a permanent alliance or agreement.

Chou En-lai skillfully employed the tactics of persuasive argumentation--sometimes combative, sometimes placating, sometimes philosophical. There was little attempt at bargaining. Chou told Kissinger at one point, in a discussion about a particular phrase in the proposed communique, "You do not have to trade; all you have to do is convince me why our language is embarrassing."

He engineered in the Shanghai Communique a diplomatic precedent; the Chinese and American governments agreed to publicly disagree on issues which were irreconcilable, most notably the Taiwan issue. This unusual approach--exposing what were very basic and significant differences between Chinese and American purposes--had the effect of lending credence to those areas of commonality. Most important of these shared desires were the need to curb Soviet hegemony and the need to normalize relations. Both of these ideas were crucial to Chou's goal to find a counterbalance to the primary threat to Chinese national interests--the Soviet Union.

Was Chou En-lai's initiative to the West in the Chinese interests? Was it successful? The answer to both of these questions is yes.

Chou had persuaded the Americans to open lines of communication and to consider Chinese interests in their dealings with other countries. This alone had the desired effect on the Soviet Union. The Russian initiatives to solve long-standing issues with the U.S.--Berlin and measures to prevent accidental nuclear war were examples--

showed that the Soviets took this new development very seriously. This would relieve to some extent Soviet pressure against China.

The U.S. would be afforded the opportunity to disentangle itself without humiliation from Viet Nam. Hanoi had to respect this new U.S.-P.R.C. understanding, if for no other reason, due to its proximity to China. By agreeing to a continued U.S. involvement in Indochina, Chou helped ease the problem of encirclement by Soviet client-states in that arena.

If the U.S. was to consider Chinese interests in dealing with Japan, then the Japanese had to consider those interests when dealing with China in order not to upset relations with the United States, its valued trading partner and military protector.

By agreeing that the Taiwan issue would be resolved peacefully, both sides could maintain favorable domestic public opinion and prevent this contentious issue in the most favorable light to their own people.

China did not change her policy towards the United States. Rhetoric continued. No formal agreements were consummated. Taiwan remained an unresolved issue. Chou had, by persuading the U.S. that in some areas their national interests had converged, gained both the security and development opportunities his country needed. This had been accomplished at virtually no cost and at minimum risk to the Peoples Republic of China.

Chou En-lai had succeeded while giving very little in return other than acknowledging what was already status quo. As Dr. Kissinger stated, "The China card was not ours to play."